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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 000502

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CEN

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SUBJECT: HONDURAS: POLITICAL AND LEGAL STANDOFF CONTINUES

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 495 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reason 1.4 (B & D)

11. (U) Summary: Presented with widespread defiance from the Military, Congress, the Justice system, pro-democracy protesters and the private sector, President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya has been forced to rely on loyal social activists, labor unions, the police and government bureaucrats for his attempt to implement a poll which will survey Honduras's appetite for a future referendum on changing the constitution. Following high political tensions yesterday, things appeared calmer with the canceling of a planned general strike by Zelaya supporters. Zelaya has also indicated his willingness to consider reinstating his Armed Forces Chief General Romeo Vasquez Velasquez. END SUMMARY.

POLITICAL CLIMATE IMPROVES BUT REMAINS TENSE

12. (C) The political climate was calmer today but remained tense throughout Honduras as the standoff continued between President Manuel &Mel8 Zelaya, Congress, the Supreme Court and the military. There were some signs that the various sides were pulling back. At Zelaya's request, the Ambassador set up a phone call between him and fired joint chief General Romeo Vasquez. Zelaya suggested to us that he would consider reinstating Vasquez if the latter agreed to supply security, but not logistical support for his June 28 national poll (reftel). Zelaya publicly announced that logistical support for the poll would be supplied by "volunteers" instead of government employees. The Congress pulled back late the evening of June 25 from attempting to remove Zelaya from office, instead appointing a committee to investigate the president. (In a meeting with the Ambassador June 26, Supreme Court President Jorge Rivera Aviles expressed relief that the Congress had not moved forward as they do not have the power to remove a president; in Honduras, that power rests with the courts.)

13. (C) On June 25, the "Constitutional Hall," a five-magistrate panel of the Supreme Court, ruled unanimously that Zelaya's firing of Defense Joint Chief Vasquez Velasquez was illegal. It also requested that the case regarding Zelaya's poll be brought before them. Previously, an appellate court upheld a lower court's ruling that the poll was illegal and placed an injunction on GOH activity in support of the poll. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), the entity responsible for running all official Honduran elections, ruled the poll illegal on June 25. The TSE Magistrates, in turn, went to the Attorney General (AG) to request that all polling materials for this illegal poll be confiscated.

ZELAYA RECLAIMS POLLING MATERIAL

14. (U) In the morning of June 25, the Attorney General announced that his office would go to Air Force Headquarters to take control of the poll materials, which had purportedly been flown in from Venezuela, per a request from the TSE. Upon hearing the announcement, President Zelaya called upon the group of approximately 2,000 social activists gathered at the Presidential Palace, to go with him to Air Force headquarters to collect the materials themselves for distribution. Zelaya and his followers arrived at the airbase and encountered Air Force chief General Javier Prince, who despite resigning the previous day had remained at work, turned over the materials to Zelaya. Much like Prince, reports indicated that all of the service Chiefs have remained, literally, in their offices waiting for a political solution to be negotiated, while remaining unwilling to carry out the poll and taking no part in any movements against the

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Executive. DAO reports that of all the service chiefs, Prince is the most likely to possibly ally himself with Zelaya in defiance of Vasquez Velasquez.

THE ECONOMY MOSTLY SHUTS DOWN FOR PROTESTS

15. (U) The private sector, which is nearly unanimously opposed to Zelaya's plans, has been organizing protests throughout the country the past week. Many businesses closed the afternoon of June 25 and remain closed June 26, in anticipation of public disorder and traffic disruptions (which, in general, have not happened) and to allow employees to participate in pro-democracy rallies. Many government offices and state-run companies also closed. The Tegucigalpa Chamber of Commerce organized an anti-Zelaya demonstration in the capital's central park the morning of June 26; several thousand participated. Pro-Zelaya demonstrations also were planned in front of the Presidential Palace, where Zelaya's supporters remain camped out.

INTERNATIONAL POSTURING ON THE POLL

16. (C) The Ambassador hosted a meeting at the Embassy between the head of the OAS Observer Mission, Ambassador Raul Alconada, OAS Mission Director Jorge Miranda, and leadership of the G16 Stockholm Declaration Group on June 25 to discuss the current political crisis, and the OAS role in President Zelaya's planned June 28 poll. Alconada explained that the GOH had requested an "accompaniment mission," which the OAS had been obliged to provide under its Charter, but went on to state that since the GOH was no longer able to conduct the poll officially, no such mission would take place. Alconada added that his current official visit was in preparation for the November elections and not the June 28 poll, and as such he would promptly depart the country on June 26. He stated that the Permanent Council in Washington would address the political crisis in Honduras on June 26, and he anticipated

the OAS would provide the GOH its good offices to gather a consultative mission to help resolve the crisis through a multilateral, consensus-focused effort.

17. (C) According to the United Nations Representative at the meeting, the UN had declined an official invitation from the GOH to observe the June 28 poll, but that a second invitation was sent directly to the Nicaraguan President of the General Assembly Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann who had responded positively. Escoto signaled to the GOH that he would send his personal advisor Paul Oquist, a U.S. citizen who has been naturalized as a Nicaraguan, to accompany the poll, which the GOH then reported to the media as the UN observing the poll. The UN will issue a statement clarifying that Oquist would be acting in a personal rather than official capacity. At the conclusion of the meeting, all present agreed that they could only act upon invitation by the GOH and that one main challenge to resolving the crisis was the lack of communication between the polarized movements

AMERICAN CITIZENS

18. (U) The Consular Section has received a moderate number of calls from American citizens in Honduras and from the United States concerned about the situation in Honduras. Consular officers have spoken directly with several groups of American missionaries and other short-term travelers to explain what is happening and to answer their questions about security and travel options. The Embassy issued a warden message to the American community here on June 25, advising American citizens to avoid large crowds, not to attempt to pass any roadblocks they encounter, and to expect possible traffic and

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other travel delays. An updated warden message will be issued June 26. The Consular Section provided information to CA/OCS and CA/CMS for their use in answering calls to the Department from concerned American citizens. The Consular Section remains open for ACS and visa services as usual.

19. (C) COMMENT: We will continue to monitor the situation and work through multilateral as well as bilateral communication to facilitate further dialogue and a possible solution, which respects the Honduran Constitution and laws.

LLORENS